

Epilepsy and alcohol

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Introduction

The information in this fact sheet is split into two. The first part gives some facts about drinking alcohol if you have epilepsy. The second part looks at the risks of having seizures as a result of heavy and regular alcohol drinking.

The number of units of alcohol in different drinks are shown in the Appendix.

Drinking alcohol if you have epilepsy

Drinking no more than one or two units of alcohol in 24 hours doesn't usually increase the risk of having seizures. But if you have a history of alcohol abuse, even drinking small amounts could increase the number of seizures you have. This also applies if you have previously had seizures related to drinking alcohol

Drinking more than two units of alcohol in 24 hours can increase the risk of having seizures. For most people, the risk is highest when the alcohol is leaving their body after they have had a drink. This risk is between six and 48 hours after they have stopped drinking.

Drinking alcohol when you take epilepsy medicine

It is known that alcohol doesn't mix well with the epilepsy medicines phenytoin (Epanutin), carbamazepine (Tegretol) and primidone (Mysoline). There is no information available on alcohol and other epilepsy medicines.

- If you take phenytoin, regularly drinking large amounts of alcohol may make it work less well. This will increase your risk of seizures.
- Dizziness and drowsiness are common side-effects of carbamazepine. If you drink alcohol as well, these side-effects may be made worse.
- Primidone can make you sleepy. Drinking alcohol as well is likely to make you even more sleepy.
- Some people say drinking alcohol when they are taking epilepsy medicine makes them feel drunk quicker.

Whatever you decide to do about drinking alcohol, it's important always to take your epilepsy medicine as prescribed.

Alcohol causing seizures

If you are 'alcohol dependent', it means you are likely to drink heavily. You may drink at any time and for days at a time. There is a real risk of having seizures if you stop drinking suddenly after a long session of heavy drinking. These seizures are known as 'alcohol withdrawal seizures'. Some people have had status epilepticus when suddenly withdrawing from alcohol. Status epilepticus is a seizure that goes on for 30 minutes or more, or one seizure following another without recovery in between. Status epilepticus is serious. It can put a lot of strain on the brain and body. And it can be fatal.

If you want to cut down your drinking, it's important to do this gradually, to reduce the risk of alcohol withdrawal seizures. It's also possible to get treatment to stop seizures happening during alcohol withdrawal. Once you have stopped drinking, alcohol withdrawal seizures should not come back, as long as you don't start drinking again.

Further information and getting help

If you are worried you are drinking too much, and would like to do something about it, talk to your GP. They will be able to refer you to someone who can give you support, and help you to cut down your alcohol safely.

About this publication

This fact sheet is written by Epilepsy Action's advice and information team, with guidance and input from people living with epilepsy and medical experts. If you would like to know where our information is from, or there is anything you would like to say about the fact sheet, please contact us.

Epilepsy Action makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of information in its publications but cannot be held liable for any actions taken based on this information.

Date: October 2011; Due for review: October 2013; Code: F063.02

Acknowledgements

Epilepsy Action would like to thank Pamela Mantri, Epilepsy Nurse Specialist, County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust for her contribution. Pamela Mantri has declared no conflict of interest.

Epilepsy Helpline

Freephone 0808 800 5050; text 07797 805 390; helpline@epilepsy.org.uk; www.epilepsy.org.uk

Epilepsy Action, New Anstey House, Gate Way Drive, Yeadon, Leeds LS19 7XY. Tel: 0113 210 8800. Fax: 0113 391 0300.

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Appendix

Alcoholic units in different drinks

Different strength beers, lager, cider, shots, wine and champagne may have different alcohol units

Drinks and alcohol strength %	Bottle			Can	Glass						Measure			
	275ml	330ml	750ml	440ml	Small 125ml	Standard 175ml	Large 250ml	Pint 568ml	Litre 1000ml	Small 25ml	Large 35ml	Small double (spirits) 50ml	Standard (fortified wine) 50ml	Large double 70ml
Units														
Beer, lager, cider 2%	-	0.7	-	0.9	-	-	-	1.1	2.0	-	-	-	-	-
Beer, lager, cider 5%	-	1.7	-	2.2	-	-	-	2.8	5.0	-	-	-	-	-
Beer, lager, cider 9%	-	3.0	-	4.0	-	-	-	5.1	9.0	-	-	-	-	-
Alcopops 5%	1.4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Spirits 38-40%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.0	1.4	1.9-2.0	-	2.7-2.8
Shots 38-40%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.0	1.3	-	-	-
Wine and Champagne 12%	-	-	9.0	-	1.5	2.1	3.0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fortified Wine 17.5-20%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.9-1.0	-

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